

AUTHORITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENTAnglican/Roman Catholic Commission, Southern Africa, December 1974

1. Our understanding of the nature of Authority springs from our understanding of the relationship between the three divine Persons of the Holy Trinity. Christ's authority derives from His commission from, and obedience to, the Father in the Spirit. God sent Christ into the world to reveal the Father's loving purpose for men, and to liberate the world from the power of evil and mankind from sin and death. Christ's authority is revealed and authenticated in His person and character, and by His actions and words. John v. 31 et seq.

2. Christ expresses and exercises His authority through His obedience to the Father in the loving service (diaconia) of men. Mark x. 42; John xiii. 12 - 15; Phil. ii. 6 - 8. The uniqueness of Christ's authority is proclaimed by His preaching and His mighty works. Matt. vii. 29; Mark l. 22; Luke iv. 32.

3. The authority of Christ is the source, prototype and exemplar of all authentic authority exercised by men. It is from the commissioning of Christ that the Church derives its authority to proclaim the Kingdom of God. In consequence the Church's exercise of authority in ordering its affairs is authentic only in so far as it promotes this end.

4. Like any human community the Church requires leaders to whom different gifts are given and different kinds of authority are entrusted. Christ built His Church on the foundation of the Twelve, of which Peter was the acknowledged leader. Matt. xvi. 18. They, together with those who were subsequently added to the number of the Apostles, were invested with His authority, empowered by His Spirit, and sent out to preach the Gospel, to administer the Sacraments of the New Covenant and to order the life of the Church. It is the Holy Spirit who unites the Church to Christ in His service of mankind, so that, both in its being and its activities, the Church may show forth to the world the authority of its living Lord by being His Body, the reconciled and reconciling community. Eph. i, ii.

5. The teaching of Christ and His Apostles, as uniquely preserved in the New Testament, in which the Old Testament is fulfilled, is the standard by which the obedience of subsequent generations of Christians is judged. The Holy Scriptures are not the product of men's initiative, but of Christ's Spirit. 2 Peter i. 20,21.

6. It is because Christ is the Head of His Body the Church that He has unique authority over all its members. In seeking to exercise its authority, both over its own members and those outside it, the Church is committed to winning men's freely given response of obedience. The salvation or damnation of men depends upon their readiness or refusal to respond to Christ's authority.

7. The authority of those called to particular responsibilities within the Body of Christ is recognized by the Church to the extent to which it is seen to be exercised in the Spirit of Christ, and to reproduce the love, service and respect for human dignity and freedom which characterized His authority. 1 Peter v. Already in the Gospels Christ has to condemn distorted patterns of authority. Matt. xxiii; Mark ix. 33 - 37. Authority which is motivated by self-will and self-interest, and which seeks to lord it over others by compelling their obedience, is authority abused. 1 Peter iv. 10 - 11; v. 3.

8. However, authority in the hands of sinful men always falls short of the perfection of the authority of Christ. Authority vested in the Church's officers and ministers may come into conflict with the authority of those who possess special gifts of the Spirit. The tension so created calls for mutual understanding and patience. Those holding office must be sensitive to Christ's presence and working in those who have received special gifts; and those with special gifts must use them under the guidance of the community in the service of the Church's mission and unity. 1 and 2 Corinthians passim. All who possess gifts of God must strive to understand them, and to use them to God's glory and the well-being of all.

9. Although authority is often abused, and it may therefore be sometimes questioned or opposed, it cannot be simply ignored.

Authority wielded by the State is to be respected so long as its requirements are consistent with obedience to Christ. Romans xiii. But when in the judgement of the Church, or of the conscientious conviction of members of it, the demands of the State appear to conflict with the demands of God, obedience must be given to what is sincerely believed to be God's will. In the last resort, the authority of the crucified and risen Lord must be proclaimed however great may be the present cost of obedience.